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ETHICS IN/OF GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Beyond-human ethics: The animal question in institutional ethical reviews

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate how the development of ethics and methods in beyond human and posthuman research have largely been ignored within institutional ethical frameworks. Specifically, I argue that the ethical review process for research needs critical consideration in light of emerging multispecies methodologies. The inclusion and consideration of animals in geography should go further than "bringing animals in" to the discipline; instead they must seek to rethink geographical theory as with and for non-humans. The ethics, politics, and practices of animals' inclusion in research have been differentially attended to across geographical scholarship. To do this, I investigate how institutional ethical review operates as a disciplining and shaping tool in the neoliberal university. In doing so, I contend that ethical review processes shape the narratives and structures of what kinds of research are possible for not only animal geographers, but across the discipline. I then explore how multispecies research specifically is affected by and can affect institutional ethical review, revealing how these processes fall short against the heightened backdrop of species difference. Where posthumanist ethics is in tension with institutional ethical frameworks, I argue that ethical approval does not necessarily indicate that researchers have successfully grappled with complex moral dilemmas. Particularly, the acquiring of ethical approval prioritises outmoded forms of knowledge that prioritise homogenised ethical and methodological practice over ethical innovation and questioning. Finally, I offer three propositions drawing on posthumanist ethics and informed by innovative and exploratory multispecies research: the inclusion of animals as participants in research; the reimagination of multispecies ethical and methodological practice; and the reform of institutional ethical review processes. By exploring how radical ethics might be mobilised in multispecies research, I argue that we can further geographical theory and practice to reconfigure who matters as a geographical and ethical subject.

KEYWORDS

animal geographies, beyond-human ethics, institutional ethical reviews, multispecies geographies, posthuman methodologies

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Erika Cudworth asked: "What would it mean for a dog to give their consent to be involved in research? Are dogs vulnerable subjects in that they cannot give consent in ways traditionally understood? Alternatively, might we need to revise our understanding of how we register and monitor consent in the research process?" (2018, p. 500). The methodological de-centring of the human, and the ethics of grappling with beyond human research practice, are becoming more commonly discussed in human geography (Asker & Andrews, 2020). These research practices and conversations have, however, tended to exclude highly commodified and instrumentalised animals (Arcari et al., 2020) and focused heavily on multispecies fieldwork, with little attention on institutional navigations. It is common to see in academic publications a note that confirms human participants consented, and institutional approval was granted. As Cudworth footnotes:

> While the University Ethics Committee raised issues about human participants, no mention was made of the dogs who were clearly present in the interview process. At the time, wanting to 'get on' with the research, I did not raise the issue of non-human participation, but on reflection, this kind of research in the social sciences raises questions for current institutional procedures. (2018, p. 501)

This paper addresses the role of institutional ethics in geographical research with non-human animals. It is intended as an intervention, provocation, and response to this ethical quandary. While taking multispecies research as its subject, I draw on and further debates in the geographical discipline (and beyond) regarding the constraints, questions, and hindrances that institutional ethical review imposes on research.

The editors of *International Journal of Feminist Politics* contend that institutional ethics are "one form of epistemic oppression … layering research methods on top of hierarchies without deconstructing their foundations or making them visible for all to see" (Ackerly et al., 2020, p. 310). Discussions and critique of institutional ethical review processes usually take place in footnotes or short in-text comments. In this paper, I situate institutional review processes within the neoliberal university, where "researchers may fulfil the requirements of institutional ethical review boards without actually contemplating on the moral dilemmas of doing research" (Zhang, 2020, p. 300). The discussions have relevance beyond research with non-human subjects, calling for wider scrutiny of the ethical institutional review process.

In the first part of this paper, I explore how institutional ethical reviews within the neoliberal university reproduce epistemic violence, politically displace ethical issues, and homogenise research practice. In the second part, I consider how multispecies ethics trouble the boundaries of human geography (Srinivasan, 2015), and the boundaries of the human, and discuss the implications of this. In the third part, I offer examples of how ethical methodological practices, especially posthuman ethnographies, overflow, subvert, and challenge ethical review processes. I conclude by suggesting how we might mobilise these ethical questions to reconfigure not only geographical practice in the field, but within the institutions we operate from and through.

2 | NEOLIBERAL INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS

Institutional ethical review processes enforce regulatory demands on research projects and ethics, dictating what and who researchers should be concerned with. They were first widely introduced when external funders began to threaten funding cuts to research that wasn't granted ethical approval (around the turn of the millenium; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2016). The institutional (rather than national) implementation led to differing processes, in theory responding to localised institutional contexts. In practice, this has meant that qualitative, and particularly ethnographic, research's "unique ethical, political, and methodological puzzles" (Anderson & Herr, 1999, p. 14) often face "bureaucratic slogs" of revisions. Researchers, especially those unfamiliar with the process, dedicate time and energy to often numerous iterations of ethical review in opaque structures where incorrect navigations can carry weighty delays (Fouché & Chubb, 2017). Acquiring approval is further complicated for those whose research ethics clash with institutional definitions, which are rarely made explicit.

Despite attempts to make ethical review applications formulaic by structuring research into context, methods, anticipated issues, and mitigation, "fieldwork ethics are highly situational and ultimately dependent on the moral judgements of the researcher" (Hemmings, 2006, p. 16). The gap between institutional approval and ethical practice is further pronounced where dynamic, fluid, and experimental research practices diverge from these research structures. While institutional ethical review processes serve an important and necessary purpose in eradicating exploitative research, they do not go far enough in allowing space for work that critiques institutional conceptions of research epistemologies. These ethical frameworks rely on "genuinely

informed consent" and autonomy, valuing humanism in research (Mackenzie et al., 2007). However, given feminist critiques of fieldwork power relations and positionality (England, 1994), "genuinely informed consent" might itself be unfeasible.

"Response-ability" (Greenhough & Roe, 2010) in social science research is part of a shift to "ever-more elaborate and codified ethical review committees that lack specific and relevant expertise to both define and regulate research practice" (p. 45). The ethical review as part of protectionist institutional neoliberal bureaucracy can be thought of as a process of "filing"; files operate in universities as places where we and our research "end up" (Ahmed, 2018, n.p.). Ahmed constructs complaint files as places where histories can go missing, reappear, and move through university bureaucracy, to protect the institution and as a potential disciplining tool. We might similarly understand "ethics creep" as a disciplining tool, in the sense of ostensibly being "examinations" where the "production, submission, and review of research through formal ethics review [serves] as one of the few mechanisms through which academics can be punished" (Guta et al., 2012, p. 307) by delays, denials, or terminations. Ethical review processes are a filing exercise in non-response-ability: they politically displace issues by individualising risk through bureaucracy. Institutional ethical review is complicit in obstructing innovative research practice.

Ethical review processes "extend beyond the ethical to include the methodological … the system is a self-perpetuating and increasingly rule-bound mechanism, and despite a rhetoric of accountability is a system obscure to outsiders" (Dyer & Demeritt, 2009, p. 46). Neoliberal institutional ethics ignores debates and reports on ethical practice (Valentine, 2005) and are instead used to manage risk by tempering radical research. For example, where feminist and postcolonial geographers have posed questions of voice, representation, and power as always imbued in research practice and in writing (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010; McDowell, 1999), such nuance is absent from institutional review processes. These processes are divorced from disciplinary norms and debates, resulting in acontextual methodological disciplining.

In the ethical review process, projects are scrutinised, often by non-specialists, with a particular focus on methodologies. Some projects have methodological elements that do not fit the ethical review structures because they are, by design, kept open. In these circumstances, the ethical review process is "both more visible as something that has to be passed through, and more constricting in its effects" (Simpson, 2011, p. 378). The work required to pass (through) ethical review can be uncomfortable because it puts demands upon researchers to ensure their research conforms to conservative frameworks, posing a serious problem for critical scholarship. Simultaneously, it is possible to fulfil ethical review without grappling with complex moral dilemmas of epistemological violence (Zhang, 2020), revealing institutional ethics as a bureaucratic exercise rather than a vital reflexive one.

Institutional ethics dictates who counts as an ethical subject and enforces a particular research framework dictated by the neoliberal ideals of the university. Ethical review functions primarily to manage risk and uncertainty and avoid liability. In this conservative deployment, emerging new ethical questions are consistently ignored. In dictating who does *not* count as an ethical subject, such as animals, there is a fertile space to develop radical research ethics outside of the neoliberal institution. However, this absence also allows for potential exploitation and violence within research putting the principles of ethical research under threat.

The remainder of this paper attends to the limitations of institutional processes in geographical research with non-human animals, before contending that institutional ethical review in its current form cannot embrace innovative or speculative research. In the next section, I argue that ethical review frameworks reproduce the violences of the neoliberal university, exemplified in multispecies research.

3 | MULTISPECIES RESEARCH AND ETHICAL REVIEW

To understand how geographers might respond to or eke open institutional ethical review to other-than-human subjects, I opened the ethical approvals for my doctoral research, which included a multispecies ethnography with ex-commercial laying hens (Oliver, 2020). Where institutional ethics rely on understandings of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Wagner, 2003), these are noticeably lacking in research with animals. Nonhuman animals' inclusion in social research exists largely outside of institutional frameworks: there is no mention of the ethical requirements for social research with animals, and nothing indicates animals as non/consenting participants (Greenhough & Roe, 2010). Before turning to my own encounters with institutional ethics, a brief history of animal geography contextualises the inclusion of animals as geographical subjects.

Animals' inclusion in geographical research is situated within a long disciplinary interest, dating to (at least) Newbigin's 1913 book *Animal Geography* (Wolch & Emel, 1995). Mainstream animal geography is concerned with the places, processes, and ordering of society and environment and rarely engages in critique of the status of human/non-human relations (Castree, 2000). Critical animal geography responds to this by foregrounding the problems human exceptionalism poses, where animals are understood as "subjects of and in spatially uneven practices" (Hobson, 2007, p. 253). Critical animal geographies contest

the human–animal border, revealing the exclusions of space for non-human animals (Emel & Urbanik, 2012; Philo & Wilbert, 2000; Wolch & Emel, 1995) and critiquing the relationships between animals and space as ideologically oppressive (Hovorka, 2015). In 2017, the Vegan Geographies Collective proposed that "while an interest in domination over non-human animals has gained momentum within critical geography circles in the last two decades … the scarcity of available literature highlights the need for geographers to further reflect" (n.p.).

The sustained failure to grapple with emancipatory ethics and methods poses serious questions for geographies beyond the human. In contemporary critical research, geographers are less concerned with "bringing the animals in" to geography and more interested in rethinking geographical theory as immutably "beyond human," where "humans are always in composition with nonhumanity, never outside of a sticky web of connection" (Bennett, 2004, p. 365). As such, we must scrutinise this not only in the field, but within our disciplinary procedures. In so doing, the absence of animals from institutional ethical reviews reveals more foundational issues with ethical review processes beyond multispecies research.

Mainstream animal geographies, which are less concerned with critiquing violent interspecies relationships, work to instrumentalise animals in the advancement of human goals, reproducing animals as "killable" (Morin, 2018). This kind of work follows a welfarist philosophical position that has all but been abandoned by critical animal geographers and thinkers (Wrenn, 2019). This is obvious, for example, within geographic research involving laboratory animals, which has called for a "renewed attention and evaluation of the ethical framework underpinning animal research governance" (Davies et al., 2016, p. 8), but falls short of offering non-anthropocentric alternatives. Harm–benefit analyses (HBAs), based on utilitarian principles, evaluate the ethics of using animals in laboratory research, and Davies (2018) suggests "opening up" these HBAs to address the ongoing need for ethical review throughout projects and to establish a cut-off point for the "use" of animals. While such ethical logics clearly do not trouble boundaries or hierarchies of the human (Hobson, 2007), foregrounding this incremental approach rather than considering a different kind of transformative ethics is symptomatic of a geography that refuses animals as its subjects. There is a need, therefore, to go further in considering how the inclusion of animals proposes a fundamental reconfiguration of institutional ethics.

However, the most widely accepted inclusion of animals in ethical review processes is still found in ethical processes such as HBAs, and their utilitarian ideals are not so easily disrupted. The presence of HBAs, particularly as ongoing ethical processes, reveals that the scientific community contemplates the role of animals in its research, and the ethics of animal research. The inclusion of animals in scientific research is *de facto* harmful and HBAs seek to redress and comprehend this in relation with potential (human) benefits at individual and global scales, through measures of legitimacy, necessity, and adequacy (Würbel, 2017). In contrast, social science research includes animals in ostensibly *commensal* ways and, in making this claim, the inclusion of non-human animals has been accepted as "outside" of ethical consideration. If ethical review processes were to be seriously undertaken in social research with non-human animals, a more considered conversation about potential harms might emerge than currently exists in the assumption of non-harm in multispecies social science research. There are productive tensions to be found between the natural sciences, who knowingly inflict harm on non-human animals and seek to reduce this, and the overwhelming silence of the risk of harm to animals in social sciences research, which remains outside of institutional ethical review.

In the social sciences, multispecies research has been largely undertaken through ethnographic methods (Hamilton & Taylor, 2017), relying especially on thick description. Ethnographic methods necessitate openness to the unforeseeable and to incidents of encounter (Smith, 1987), and thus face significant problems in passing (through) the ethical review process. Where "messiness can be an incredibly productive methodological, theoretical and ethical undertaking" (Avner et al., 2014, p. 62), the refusal to sanitise research and instead "find comfort in discomfort" (Broeckerhoff & Lopes, 2020, p. 3) conflicts with the disciplining and tempering logics of institutional ethical review.

> The interviews are a means of including the voices of animal activists within the research, offering participants a chance to reflect and share their knowledge … The period of multispecies ethnographic research is informed by feminist theory, arguing that "lived experience" is a crucial standpoint. (Ethical Review Application, March 2017)

The above quote is taken from the ethical review application for my doctoral research, which involved interviewing animal activists and ethnographic work with ex-commercial laying hens which had been rehomed in a domestic space. During the ethnography, I lived with six ex-commercial laying hens, who featured heavily in my research as collaborators and participants, but these chickens were viewed institutionally, at most, as pets. The somatophobia of research (Spelman, 1988) prioritises a disembodied and distanced analysis of the world that is reproduced in these frameworks. This distancing ignores the ethical and methodological realities of working with animals and prioritises outmoded forms of knowledge production that seek to evidence ethical certainty, rather than

prioritising the progression of ethical practice. My ethical review was returned with questions over the potential illegality of activists' actions and asking me to provide contact details for emergencies.

The response attended mostly to liability and risk management, revealing the institutional wariness of potentially disruptive research (Pickerill, 2019). This focus on liability and risk reproduces not only neoliberal politics but also humanist epistemologies of academic research. There is no space for questions of transformative multispecies ethical practices, nor to consider animals as vulnerable participants who require specific attendances. There is, somewhat paradoxically, both an over-disciplining and under-regulation of multispecies methodologies. In the next section, I make three propositions for posthumanist considerations for ethical review that are informed by multispecies research.

4 | ETHICS BEYOND THE HUMAN

Institutional ethical review structures the narrative, practice, and shape of research projects. Posthumanist ethics are in direct conflict with these processes. The disciplining and standardisation of research is not a one-off negotiation within individual research projects but has longer implications for homogenising disciplinary ethical and methodological practice (Simpson, 2011). Drawing on both my own and others' multispecies research, I offer three suggestions – revisiting who counts as research participants; the reimagination of ethical and methodological practice; and the reform of ethical review – for subverting, challenging, and improving ethical review processes.

First, *revisiting who counts as research participants* challenges those undertaking and reviewing ethical approval applications to consider the subjects of research, potentially subverting traditional notions of who is involved in knowledge production. Wilkie proposes that in multispecies research, "scholars who perform academic 'dirty work' (grounded and critical labour) have a higher scholarly status than those engaged in purer forms of scholarship (theoretical labour)" (2013, p. 18), where the inverse is more usually the case in the social sciences. However, both theoretical and innovative methodological work are necessary to traverse and transform ethics in multispecies research. One subversion of this humanism can be undertaken by including animals in ethical review processes. By including animals as participants, research that explores both the vitality and precarity of animals' lives declares its intent from its inception, chipping away at institutional infrastructures.

One pertinent example of this is in Gillespie's (2019) politicised multispecies ethnography, which explores care and control across species with undergraduate students and pigs at a sanctuary. By working with pigs, students were challenged to think about the out-of-placeness of sanctuary in animal-eating worlds and consider how space is constituted by human supremacy. The research process became ethically transformative through the development of multispecies relationships, including speaking, listening, communication, and representation (Meijer, 2019). The ethical inclusion of animals asks questions with broad implications for subjectivity: "research which conceptualizes animals as part of, not incidental to, specific political configurations—that is, as subjects, not objects—enables a broader conceptualization of how the 'political' is constituted" (Hobson, 2007, p. 251).

In my research with chickens, centring animals as participants not only challenges conservative institutional ethics boards but better represents our intimate interspecies relationships. In so doing, questions that arose during fieldwork might have been pre-empted during ethical review, which is, after all, a meaningful purpose of these processes. During my research, a chicken, Lacey, died. Her death fundamentally transformed not only the behaviours and relationships of the other hens, but also my place in their world. Were Lacey a participant, her death would have had implications for the remainder of the project to be reviewed to account for her loss.

Second, *a reimagination of ethical and methodological practice* is necessary within and beyond institutional ethical reviews. In establishing and reimagining the conditions for multispecies ethical practice, it might be revealed that there are stark restrictions and violence being imposed by geography's ethical and methodological humanism. This work is already underway (Hamilton & Taylor, 2017), but institutional ethics remains relegated to footnotes. By directly addressing multispecies ethics, the process is eked open and reviewers must take seriously the ethical concerns being raised. Where it is the role of researchers trained in spatial imaginaries and interventions to "imagine the contours of just relations that humans might have with 'farmed animals' once we stop confining and killing them for food" (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2015), placing animals within ethical and methodological processes attends to this responsibility.

As posthuman geographies develop and take seriously not only vital entanglements between humans and nonhumans but also death, violence, and exploitation (Collard, 2014), a reconfiguration of ethical practice must occur within the institution as well as beyond it. Concern for animals in these conversations has largely centred on maximising benefits and minimising harm (Davies, 2018), ignoring animals' roles as geographical actors. If posthuman critique is to continue to be seriously developed in geographical scholarship (Ulmer, 2017), then ethical questions must be asked to understand animals' specific ethical needs

and motivations, and these must directly inform our methodological practice, not be an addendum to it. Working with chickens required understanding chickens as subjective beings with biological needs, but also preferences, dislikes, and social relationships exclusive of humans. Ethics and methodologies are complicated when care and control are interwoven in the researcher–participant relationship. Researching with non-human animals opens not only new questions of who counts as a geographical actor, but also contends that these ethical and methodological innovations should not fall outside of collective reckonings and conversations about how, where, and by whom this is undertaken.

Finally, there is a case to make for the *posthumanist reform of ethical review*. The expansion of human geography requires, of course, a transformation of disciplinary and institutional anthropocentric practices that is unlikely to be forthcoming. Nonetheless, imagining beyond current constraints on work with and for animals is necessary in pursuing a geography that values and explores difference. This is not antithetical to critical geography's development, but foundational to its progress.

Vadeboncoeur et al. (2016) suggest three possible future models of ethics governance – multiple ethics committees, no external researchers, or individual site-specific assessments – but each of these limits the scope of research, researchers, and continued bureaucracy, respectively. Modes of governance that don't trouble epistemological violence or critique ethical review's deployment as a disciplining tool fall short of the necessary reform. By foregrounding these issues, made strikingly apparent across the species barrier, there is an opportunity – necessity, perhaps – to think more critically about how ethical review processes should be developed moving forwards. This reform might require a number of disciplinary consultations, expertise, and iterations to be made relevant to contemporary concerns in a world that faces challenges that cannot be resolved without troubling the centrality of the human ethical and geographical subject (Ginn, 2017).

5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper I have asked questions of geographies' ethics and politics as becoming particularly salient when traversing the species barrier by considering multispecies research within institutional ethical frameworks. I have explored how institutional ethical processes reproduce the erasure of animals as geographical and ethical actors. In their invisibilisation, there is a politicised displacement of ethical issues that could be challenging, disrupting, and progressing normative geographical practice. This is related to, but not wholly symptomatic of, the neoliberal university's bureaucratic processes of institutional ethical review that discipline and homogenise research ethics and practice under "risk management," and the humanist assumptions that underpin institutional ethical frameworks.

I offer that we might also subvert and radicalise our responses to these ethical reviews to consider who matters as ethical and geographical actors. By operationalising and deploying transformative multispecies ethics within institutional review processes, the three provocations – revisiting who counts as research participants; the reimagination of ethical and methodological practice; and the reform of ethical review along posthumanist lines – would allow for the theorisation, practice, and promotion of a wider reform of ethics within and beyond these structures.

Institutional ethical review cannot, in its current form, embrace emergent innovative and speculative methods, and this is starkly visible in research with non-human subjects. However, this problem is not limited to researchers of the beyond human, nor to geographers. Institutional ethical boards have for at least 20 years been fundamental to implementing the disciplining and conservative visions of the neoliberal university, as well as influencing what kinds of methodological practice are permissible in disciplines. Yet, this work is often undertaken by non-specialist reviewers. The reform of institutional ethics has interdisciplinary implications, at the local, university, and sector-wide scales.

The propositions here should serve as provocations for the development of ethical review in which geographers can use their specific expertise and spatial lens that values difference to pave the way for broader ethical reconfigurations. Such considerations are already part of the practice of many geographers, but in turning this lens onto the structures through which we, our research, and our non-human subjects must pass through, geographers can move this forgotten footnote into a critical site of transformation.

Geographers must both refuse and reimagine institutional ethics to expand the contours of methodology and ethics. By exploring how radical ethics might be mobilised in multispecies research, we can further geographical theory and practice that reconfigures who matters as a geographical and ethical subject. This has wide-ranging implications not only for animals, but for other ecological and environmental geographical subjects being extended ethical consideration. These implications may well require us to ask critical and difficult questions of our research on human participants, multispecies communities, and the world itself, but doing so would allow us to expand ethical geographical theory and practice that reconfigures who matters as geographical and ethical actors, accounting for the realities of an ever-changing world beyond the human.

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